DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 988 CG 023 331

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TITLE Occupational Choices of Elementary School Children: Traditional or Non-Traditional?
PUB DATE Jan 90
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Consultation on Vocational Counselling (16th, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, January 23-25, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Age Differences; Attitude Change; Career Choice; *Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Nontraditional Occupations; *Occupational Aspiration; Preadolescents; Sex Differences; Sex Stereotypes; *Socioeconomic Status; *Student Attitudes; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *Ontario

ABSTRACT

This study examined the occupational perspectives and preferences of 178 students (ages 9-14 ) from three urban schools; one in a high socioeconomic area; the second in a lower socioeconomic stratum with parents in white and blue collar jobs; and the third in a low-income industrial area where most parents lived in subsidized low-income housing and were employed in manufacturing and production occupations. Students completed questionnaires comprised of seven categories, each with five occupations which they were asked to rank order according to their "desired vocation" once they finished their education. Each grouping included occupations traditionally stereotyped as male or female. Results showed that the ratio of boys to girls in choosing traditional gender-stereotyped occupational roles was 8:1. Sex-stereotyped answers were given most often by the lowest socioeconomic group, followed by the highest socioeconomic group. The middle group demonstrated virtually no pattern of selecting traditionally male or female occupations. Marriage and family remained predominant in the minds of the girls, but 94 per cent of them indicated a desire for an outside career--yet their choice of outside careers still tended to reflect occupations traditionally considered to be female dominated. The male respondents' perceptions of their occupational roles did not reflect any drastic change from the traditional view. (TE)

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# Occupational Choices of Elementary School Children: Traditional or Non-Traditional?

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Abstract

The occupational choices made by 178 children attending three elementary schools in Southwestern Ontario indicate a slight change in attitude. Marriage and family remain predominant in the minds of the girls, but they do wish to have a career outside the home, although it remains traditional in nature. Very few boys in the study gave any consideration to occupational choices which were non-traditional.

# Occupational Choices of Elementary School Children: Traditional or Non-Traditional?

With the dawn of the 90s one would hope that the issue of gender stereotyping of occupations could be laid to rest. There was a proliferation of papers in the professional literature exploring different aspects of this issue during the 70s and 80s. Many of these studies, which examined children's attitudes toward occupational roles, suggested nothing had really changed from the early 60s. In fact a review of the literature by Bailey and Nihlen (1989) showed most research indicates that during the last 25 years stereotyping of career roles still occurs in young children and that form of stereotyping has a significant influence on career choice and aspirations (Lehman & Witty, 1963; Looft, 1971; Schlossberg & Goodman, 1972; Siegel, 1973; Barclay, 1974; Harris, 1974; Vondracek & Kirchener, 1974; Nelson, 1978; Gregg & Dobson, 1980; Franken, 1983; Hageman & Gladding, 1983; Adams & Hicken, 1984; Ogden, Tobin-Bennett & Shepelak, 1984; Nihlen & Bailey, 1988). For instance Looft (1971) found that boys in grades one and two perceived twice as many occupational opportunities open to them as did their female classmates. Moreover, the majority of girls in that study chose either nurse or teacher as their desired occupational goal.

Studies by Iglitzen (1972) indicated that although a high percentage of girls had varied career aspirations, many of them tended to picture themselves as wives and mothers in adulthood, while boys viewed themselves solely in terms of their careers. This is not surprising! Havighurst (1964) noted that children age 5-10 years tends to identify with a worker such as father, mother, or some other significant person. For these children the concept of working becomes a part of the "ego-ideal", the internal standard by which a person measures himself or herself, and yet most mothers of this era were homemakers while most fathers were the wage earners. In addition, the most significant adults other than members of the extended family tend to be teachers, and teaching is a traditional role. Furthermore, Havighurst submits the notion that the focus of vocational development of the teenager from age 15 on is on the acquisition of a identity as a worker in the occupational structure. It follows that the time frame immediately preceding this stage, i.e. from age 10-15 years, demands continued identification with workers as a prelude to the search for appropriate work experience by young people. It is this opportunity of identification which becomes crucial.

Garrett, Ein and Tremaine (1977) on the other hand, examined sex stereotyping of adult occupations in first, third and fifth graders and found that as the children in

their sample got older the tendency to formulate rigid sex stereotypes towards occupational roles tended to decrease.

According to Gottfredson (1981), children 6 to 8 years of age eliminate occupations they perceive as not gender appropriate. Bailey and Nihlen (1989) suggest that if this is the case, children in fourth and fifth grade (ages 9 to 11 years) would have already eliminated many occupations from their list of potential career options. Further Post-Kammer (1987) found that work values and career maturity differ according to sex to a greater extent than to grade level among ninth and eleventh grade students. Most gender-based differences in her study were closely aligned with traditional sex role expectations.

Results from studies such as these may have provided an impetus to groups concerned with "equal rights" and "affirmative action" who had championed the cause of non-sex-role stereotyping for over a decade. Indeed, Zuckerman and Sayre's (1982) research suggests that their efforts were succeeding; for they found that sex-role attitudes within certain segments of society may have changed somewhat, particularly among college educated people. Moreover, Basow (1986) noted that for more than two decades research and theory have increased our knowledge of the psychology of gender roles.

It is our position, however, that the degree to which these changes in perspective have infiltrated the elementary school is still debatable. Consequently, the present study was initiated to examine the perspectives of local elementary school aged children (9-14 years) about occupational choices and employment opportunities for males and females. To be more specific, the study described here examined whether:

1) a greater percentage of males than females will choose traditional occupational roles;

2) more males than females will choose white collar jobs; and

3) males and females from lower socio-economic areas tend to project for themselves more stereotypical roles than do their counterparts from upper socio-economic regions.

## Method

The sample for this study included 96 male and 82 female (N = 178) junior and intermediate students from three schools in an urban school district in Southwestern Ontario. One of these schools was in a predominately professional high socio-economic area of the city; a second contained students who were from a somewhat lower socio-economic strata and whose parents worked at both white and blue collar jobs; the third school was located in what might be

labeled as an industrial part of the city, and the majority of the parents of this group lived in low-income subsidized housing. Some 55% of the working population is employed in manufacturing and production occupations.

Questionnaires comprised of seven catagories, each of which contained five occupations were distributed to each student in the sample. The students were asked to rank order each of the five occupations according to their "desired vocation" once they finished their education. Each grouping included occupations that have traditionally been stereotyped as male or female.

## Results

A review of the data indicated that the ratio of boys to girls choosing traditional occupational roles was 8:1. Interestingly, as the age of the male respondents decreased, their choice of traditional male jobs also decreased. In fact the ratio of nine-year-old males to females choosing traditional occupations was only 2:1. Overall, 20.8% of the males chose medical doctor as their first choice whereas only 7.3% of the females ranked this profession as number one. On the other hand, 54.9% of the females ranked nurse first and 30.5% ranked secretary as number one, whereas not a single male had these occupations ranked first.

The suggestion presented earlier in this paper that more males than females would select "white collar" occupations was not evident within this study. In fact, 76.1% of the females identified white collar choices while only 60.6% of the males made this identification; the latter chose positions such as doctor, military officer, auto mechanic, fire fighter, and computer analyst. The females selected nursing, primary teacher, secretary, and hair dresser.

The data also suggested a relationship between socio-economic level and the type of occupations chosen. Sex stereotypic answers were given by the lowest socio-economic group most often, followed by the highest socio-economic group. The middle socio-economic group of respondents demonstrated virtually no pattern of selecting traditional male and/or female occupations.

## Discussion

Overall, the information obtained in this study suggests that the occupational choices young females are making have changed. As indicated earlier, studies undertaken in the 70s suggested that many females still "made marriage and family the predominant focus" of their projected future despite the fact that 94% of the respondees also indicated their desire for an outside career. The data

in the present study projected an image of a female whose primary focus is on a career outside the home. In fact, only 4% of the females within this study viewed their primary career as "home related". However, it is worth noting that the "outside careers" selected, to a great extent, still tend to reflect those occupations which are traditionally considered to be female dominated.

The male respondents' perceptions of their occupational roles, on the other hand, do not reflect any drastic change from the traditional view. Not a single respondee from this sample (N = 96) selected househusband as his occupational choice. Nor for that matter did any boys select "secretary". Moreover, only four chose dental assistant or primary teacher as an occupation they would consider pursuing.

Haring and Beyard-Tyler (1984) think they can shed some light on this phenomenon! They presented three factors keeping girls from pursuing non traditional occupations; i.e., occupations that traditionally have been associated with members of the opposite sex:

1) sex-role socialization,

2) poor self-efficacy, and

3) negative attitudes held by women and their peers.

One wonders if these points might just as easily describe the young men. During this stage of development peer

pressure and affiliation have a strong influence in shaping a youngster's choices.

The findings of the study described here also are in keeping with those of Kammer (1985). She concluded that "women continue to choose careers that are more easily interrupted, less demanding, and require fewer educational prerequisites than men" (pp. 18-19). The Kammer study of 128 rural eighth grade boys and girls provided insights not unlike those of the present study of an industrial community. The male students tended to choose realistic (technically inclined people) and investigative (abstract problem solvers) occupations with an emphasis on using data and handling or manipulating things as opposed to the female students selecting social (people helpers), enterprising (people influencers), and convention (data and detail people) occupations involving relationships with people. According to Holland (1985), the occupational base of this city can be viewed as realistic and one might reasonably expect the underlying tone to be somewhat conventional in its outlook.

In a rather intriguing series of researches Dorn and Welch (1985) utilized Woodrick's Survey of Career Attitudes (1979) to examine myths held by junior and senior high school youth. One of their findings indicated that their 400 students believed there are proper "traditional" work

roles for men and women. Since there is some overlap in the age range of that study and the study under consideration here, it is possible that the views of our children might reasonably be expected to remain in place unless a specific intervention is applied with enough force to change the views of these children. Indeed, the second author of this paper found in his earlier studies that unless a determined effort by counsellors is present, work values do not change during the grades eight to twelve time frame (Wearne and Powell, 1977).

It may be well worth adding a notation by Lopez and Andrews (1987, p. 305): "The achievement of a personal identity requires an awareness and introjection of the differences between one's own values, needs, and aspirations and those of others, most notably one's parents." It would seem from this wise assertion that self-exploration and self-understanding, such as might occur during, or as a result of, the counselling process might be necessary to assist young people to develop a socially acceptable and personally satisfying attitude toward gender roles.

## Conclusion

The high note of the study reported here is that the occupational choices being made by our young females have changed. Marriage and a family are predominant in their

minds, yet they wish also to have a career outside the home. A slight change in attitude is also evident among the younger male pupils. Whatever movement there has been, has occurred in the 9-11 year-old age range.

Given this information, it appears that there is still a great deal of work to do in order to change the elementary school students' perspectives on what type of occupational opportunities are appropriate and available to them when the time comes for them to enter the work force.

Thus, while this study suggests that there is some change in the occupational perspectives of males and females at this level, one is still struck by the fact that the pace of such change is excruciatingly slow.

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